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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ADDIS ABABA 000145

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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/E, DRL FOR SJOSEPH, AND INR/B
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SUBJECT: THE ETHIOPIAN GOVERNMENT CHEWS THE CUD

REF: A. 07 ADDIS ABABA 02284

1B. 07 ADDIS 02813

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR DONALD YAMAMOTO FOR REASON 1.4 (B) AND (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Over the course of the week of January 7, the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEB) hammered what appear to be the final nails in the coffin of the opposition Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) party. Since their surprise showing in the 2005 elections, gaining enough seats to become the second largest political party in Ethiopia, the CUD has virtually disintegrated as a result of internal power struggles and interference from the Ethiopian Government (GoE). In the latest set back, the NEB awarded the famous victory sign -- the CUD symbol widely recognized by voters -- to former ally turned foe, Lidetu Ayalew of the United Ethiopian Democratic Party-Medhin (UEDP-Medhin). The NEB followed this later in the week by finally awarding registration of the reformed Coalition for Unity and Democracy Party (CUDP) party name to yet another former CUD ally turned foe Addis Ababa city council member-elect Ayele Chamisso. Though Ayele, who is broadly viewed as having been co-opted by the GoE, has invited all factions of the former CUD to join his party, few will likely take his offer. With less than three months until the local elections, this leaves Temesgen and other prominent leaders with no legal entity under which to field candidates and stripping them of their status in parliament as largest opposition party. While CUD leaders regroup and decide on a way forward, the millions of CUD supporters are incensed at the NEB's delivery of the CUD name and symbol to the party's betrayers. The NEB deputy chairman's private statement to USAID's senior democracy and governance advisor that it "will kill the CUD" supports skeptics' assumptions that the EPRDF is battling political opposition through technically-legal GoE administrative decisions, rendering many unable to contest the coming elections and running the risk of prompting others to boycott in response to an uneven playing field. END SUMMARY.

CUD VERSUS CUD

12. (SBU) Since their release from prison during the summer of 2007 (ref A), CUD leaders including Hailu Shawel, Birtukan Mideksa, Berhanu Nega and others, have strategized and

jockeyed for position in the future of the former CUD. It did not take long before old tensions resurfaced and the unified face of the imprisoned CUD leaders began to show cracks. On separate trips to the U.S. in order to reconnect with diaspora supporters and raise funds (ref B), separate factions led by Hailu Shawel in one camp and Berhanu Nega and Birtukan Mideksa in another, began bickering publicly. This ultimately led to Hailu Shawel nominally suspending several CUD leaders from the party and naming CUD Supreme Council member and former detainee Abayneh Berhanu as his proxy as interim Chairman. Many in the Supreme Council countered that Hailu alone does not have the authority to suspend members, stating that such issues must be raised once Hailu returns from the U.S. and a party congress is allowed to take place. Hailu has still not returned and a party congress still has not happened.

¶3. (C) While many of the CUD leaders remained locked up in Kaliti prison, those CUD officials on the outside attempted to keep the party alive, despite the fact that the most prominent leaders were facing a possible death penalty for charges against them. This task fell largely to federal MP Temesgen Zewdie and Addis Ababa city council member-elect Ayele Chamisso, who obtained the public support necessary and, in Spring 2006, applied to the NEB to register the name Coalition for Unity and Democracy Party (CUDP). Despite the fact that members began immediately using the name CUDP, the name had not been formally recognized by the NEB. Ayele and Temesgen, interim vice chairman and chairman respectively, were required to hold a party congress to formalize the leadership, thus making the party legal. Though they initially worked closely together, power struggles developed between the two of them, prohibiting them from holding a mutually-recognized congress.

¶4. (C) The actions of Ayele, who never had a great deal of support among the CUD, were widely believed to be the result

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of his being co-opted by the GoE. (NOTE: On several occasions, details from private Embassy-hosted meetings between Temesgen and Ayele appear on the covers of government newspapers within days of the meetings. As Post stopped inviting Ayele to such meetings the reports ceased. END NOTE.) Both held party congresses unattended by the other, despite the NEB requirement that both be present. Temesgen took the NEB to court for not recognizing his party congress, insisting that he invited Ayele, that as interim chairman it was his congress to call, and that he fulfilled his duty. The courts finally ruled against him on December 25, 2007, leaving the CUDP back at square one -- without formal recognition as a party from the NEB.

NEB NIPS POSSIBLE RECONCILIATION IN THE BUD

¶5. (C) Post frequently inquired with the NEB on the status of the CUD party name, urging them to settle the issue and allow the party to reform. NEB board members insisted that they were being patient with Temesgen and Ayele and allowing them to settle their differences. In a meeting with Ambassador on January 11, NEB board chairman Dr. Merga Bekana and vice-chairman Dr. Addisu Gebre-Egziabher said that the Board still had not decided on the CUDP's registration and would continue to consider the matter in coming weeks. Almost immediately following the meeting, however, the NEB publicly announced that it had decided that morning to award the party license to Ayele. This followed their controversial decision earlier in the week to give the CUD's famous victory symbol to the CUD's despised adversary Lidetu Ayalew (another person believed to have been co-opted by the GoE during the CUD's post-2005 election struggles), and his UEDP-Medhin party.

¶6. (SBU) The NEB's decisions leave Temesgen Zewdie -- and the likely dozens of MPs that will choose to follow him rather

than join Ayele's party -- without a party under which to run in the local elections. Temesgen and his followers had been actively preparing for the elections, which are scheduled for April 13 and 20, and intended to field candidates for local government seats, as well as open parliamentary seats available in the by-election scheduled for the same time. Now, unless they choose to join Ayele's party (which few Ethiopian opposition politicians would likely do, as it would undermine their credibility in the eyes of their constituents), the genuine leaders of CUDP are effectively out of the local elections.

¶17. (SBU) It had also been widely reported that Temesgen and his followers had been in discussions with the largest faction of the former CUD Supreme Council led by Berhanu Nega and Birtukan Mideksa about merging and reforming the party. This would unite the two factions of the CUDP with the widest followings. The NEB's decision has hastened these discussions, with a likely announcement this week regarding a party merger. Though they have not yet decided, the combined party is expected to apply to the NEB to register under a new party name, though it will be too late to participate in local elections.

COMMENT: NEB PLAYING POLITICS

¶18. (C) The NEB as an institution was central to much of the controversy that followed the 2005 elections. Its refusal in early 2005 to permit domestic election observers forced the issue into the courts where a decision was delayed until just days before the election, effectively preventing domestic observers to deploy broadly. The opposition fiercely accused the NEB of being under the influence of the GoE and of delivering votes to the ruling Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Forces (EPRDF) party after the opposition's surprisingly strong showing. Since then, a new Board has been put in place, but the opposition have not altered their criticism. The NEB's recent decisions to award the CUD party symbol and name to politicians, who are at best undeserved and at worst proxies of the GoE, has done much to reignite lingering suspicions regarding the NEB's independence. As if to prove these suspicions, NEB vice-chairman Dr. Addisu (a Tigrayan political scientist widely believed to be the "enforcer" at the NEB) recently

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commented to USAID's Senior Democracy Advisor -- a former Stanford University Political Science Professor) (strictly protect) that the NEB had decided to "kill the CUD." The NEB decisions of the last week have effectively done exactly that.

¶19. (C) Though in-fighting within the CUD has certainly further hamstrung efforts to regain the strength and support that the party had in 2005, awarding the party name to Ayele Chamisso at this late date, and after nearly a year available to consider the issue, has made it certain that the factions of the CUD with the most popular support will not participate in the upcoming local elections and that votes that are cast for the CUD based on the once-CUD's victory sign or name will accrue to UEDP-Medhin or Ayele's group. The elimination of the remnants of the old CUD -- together with the ongoing harassment of other opposition parties to the extent that most are contemplating boycotting the elections, as well as the continued detention of the civil society leaders Daniel Bekele and Netsanet Demissie, who were instrumental in organizing civil society in the 2005 elections (septels) -- ensures that the GoE will not face nearly the competition and public outcry that it had to deal with in the last elections. It is also a concrete example of Ethiopia's steady retreat from multi-party democracy and respect for human rights since ¶2005.

¶10. (C) The Ambassador and Embassy have actively engaged the

GoE at every level and will continue to press for the early release on parole for the remaining two detainees. Finally, we plan to meet with opposition party leaders to push for Temesgen and his bloc, the largest in the opposition, to join a registered party in order to be able to participate in the up-coming local elections.

YAMAMOTO